

Seattle's Kitna building on world of experience

By THOMAS CULLEN

It's funny how things work out. Last spring, the Seahawks' Jon Kitna went to Europe and was slated to be the backup quarterback for the Barcelona Dragons. An early season injury to starter Stoney Case pushed Kitna into the starting role. It was a role the Washington native attacked with the ferocity of a pit bull in a butcher shop.

All Kitna did was lead the Dragons to a victory in the World Bowl and pick up the game's MVP honor. Along the way he was named offensive player of the week three times. He was nosed out of the league MVP award by T.J. Rubley, who led the Rhein Fire to the best record in the World League, now called NFL

Europe. There were only three 300-yard passing games in the league last year and Kitna had them all. He finished the season as the league's best passer with a rating of 82.9, throwing for a league-leading 2,448 yards and 22 touchdowns. He also rushed for three TDs.

So what does one do for an encore? He comes back to the States and goes ballistic in the preseason. He completed 42 of 51 attempts for 420 yards and five TDs playing in all five of Seattle's exhibition contests. If you ask Kitna, he'll tell you that going to Europe was a positive move in his career.

"Just playing and getting the experience, was the key," Kitna said last week after a Seahawks voluntary camp. "When you get to

this level as a quarterback you start thinking too much, and when you think too much you're dead. When you're in the situation I was in on practice squads, all you're doing is seeing things, you're never getting a chance to put them in motion. At some point you need to do things physically, get out there and play so you can learn how to react instead of just thinking. So in that respect, playing in Europe helped me a lot."

So is there a starting role in the NFL down the road for Kitna? If you look at the Seahawks' quarterback situation, the future does look bright for the 25-year-old out of Central Washington.

With the 41-year-old Warren Moon on the tail end of a Hall-of-Fame career and John Friesz

prone to injury, Kitna could end up as the Seahawks' starter. In fact, it was injuries to Moon and Friesz last season the led to Kitna's first NFL start.

"I don't think I'd have the desire to play the game and stay in the game if I didn't think at some point I could be a starter, that's just not my nature," Kitna said. "It gets hard on me. This is going to be my third year starting the season as a backup of some sort. I don't want to be there but at the same time I understand that you have to earn your stripes. Warren Moon is a Hall-of-Fame quarterback and John Friesz is a pretty darn good quarterback. I think the most important thing is to stay prepared and be ready for when my time comes."

Kitna's time came last season in

Week 15 against the Raiders when he got the starting nod over an injured Moon. The former Dragon led the Seahawks to a 22-21 win by completing 23 of 37 attempts for 283 yards. He threw one TD and was picked off twice. In the next and final game of the season against the 49ers, Kitna replaced Moon in the fourth quarter and was a perfect 8-of-8 for 88 yards.

"One game does not make you a bona fide starter or make you a superstar," Kitna said. "It's consistency over time so I have to stay prepared. Yes, the Oakland game was great but I could go out and start another game this year and bomb and that's going to be the last thing on people's minds. So it was a good foundation but I have to build on it."

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